

Towns may hold back payments to Sullivan County

◆**Coalition:** Towns of Sunapee, Newport, Claremont and Grantham want more accountability for the county budget.

By KRISTEN SENZ

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NEWPORT — Claremont City Councilor Jeff Goff says he and a bipartisan group of selectmen from Sunapee, Newport and Grantham are taking a stand in an effort to force collaboration in Sullivan County government and accountability for what has become a \$3.9 million cumulative county budget deficit.

The four towns represent about 63 percent of the county tax base.

Goff said if the elected county officials don't take action on the group's proposed accountability steps, the county will need to borrow money to continue to operate its jail and nursing home, as well as other programs and services.

Members of the coalition said the timing of yesterday's announcement was deliberate. Elected officials will have 50 days after next week's election to make progress on the group's proposals before Sullivan County tax bills are due on Dec. 17.

"Unless we see clear and immediate progress with this demand, we are prepared to withhold our tax payments to the county until such progress is made," the group said in its prepared statement.

Goff, who says he's "cautiously optimistic" it won't go that far, plans to request that the Claremont City Council take the issue of the protest at its next meeting, scheduled for Nov. 5.

"The overriding theme here is, 'Enough is enough,' and if no one else is going to take a leadership position to solve these problems then we will, and we'll hold everyone else's feet to the fire," Goff said. "It's not a partisan threat, it's not a political 'gotcha game' — these are fundamental issues that need to

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be addressed."

The coalition wants county officials to add a chief financial officer position to the county government staff, to create a "detailed strategic utilization plan" for the county nursing home and fundamentally to change how the county budget is created and adopted.

The county already is seeking to hire an accounting manager, but Goff said the job should carry more authority. "We don't need a glorified bookkeeper," he said.

As for the county nursing home,

Goff said, there's no excuse for subsidization with tax dollars. There should be some way to make it solvent, "whether that's through privatizing it, whether it's through selling it or whether it's through completely changing the business model," he said.

The Sullivan County Delegation met an unprecedented six times before it completed the county budget earlier this fall, and the meetings were often tense. Delegation members and onlookers expressed frustration with the way the meetings were

run.

"It is completely irresponsible to continue playing politics with the county budget," said Grantham Selectman Connie Jones, who joins Goff and others in the budget opposition. "Until the citizens of Sullivan County have the assurances that the county finances will not be a political tug-of-war between the delegation and the county commissioners, we will have no faith and trust in the process."

Newport selectmen Beverly Rodeschin and Gary Nichols and

Sunapee selectmen Steve White and Bill Roach are participating with Goff and Jones. The representatives from each community plan to bring the measure to their fellow selectmen and councilors for a vote in the near future, Goff said.

State Rep. Peter Franklin, D-Newport, is chairman of the Sullivan County Delegation. Reached by telephone last night, he said he had not seen the group's proposal and declined to comment.

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